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SUBJECT: NEW JORDANIAN PM REACHES OUT TO PARLIAMENT,  
ISLAMISTS, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PRESS

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Since his designation as Prime Minister on October 22, Faisal al-Fayez has undertaken an ambitious campaign to reach out to diverse segments of Jordanian society that have received little attention from past PMs. In addition to meeting with parliamentary blocs, Fayeze has engaged in formal dialogue with Islamist leaders, civil society organizations (including professional associations), and the press. Embassy sources generally give Fayeze high marks for his outreach efforts, his willingness to listen, and his promises of public involvement in setting government policy. Yet Fayeze has yet to reveal any specific plans for his government, speaking only of general principles and goals, and there is still skepticism about whether this government will truly be different from its predecessors. End Summary.

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PARLIAMENT AS A TRUE PARTNER?  
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12. (U) Soon after the formation of his cabinet, Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez pledged publicly that his government would engage all sectors of Jordanian society in a strong push for political and economic development. In an interview October 31, Fayeze stated, "My government seeks an open dialogue, and we believe in the importance of continuous and active dialogue with all political sectors, parties and civil society institutions." Reflecting this sentiment, Fayeze's schedule the last few weeks has been filled with meetings with politicians, religious leaders, media representatives, and NGOs. He also formed a seven-member ministerial committee to follow up on the national dialogue campaign for political development which includes the ministers of political development, foreign affairs, interior, education, higher education, labor and Islamic affairs.

13. (U) One of Fayeze's main targets for dialogue is Parliament. During a recent public interview, he noted that the relationship between the government and Parliament "will be one of close cooperation and constant coordination," and stated that it was the duty of Parliament to monitor the government's performance. To help foster close ties with Parliament, Fayeze announced that he would meet with all parliamentary blocs to brief them on his government's goals and to listen to their concerns.

14. (C) Fayeze, accompanied by Minister for Political Development Mohammad Daoudiyeh, first met November 2 with the National Reformist bloc (the largest of the parliamentary groupings). According to MP Dr. Audeh Quawas (Christian - Amman, 3rd District), Fayeze appeared serious about listening to their concerns, devoting more than two hours to discussions and actively soliciting comments. Fayeze did not, however, present any kind of specific plan or strategy on behalf of the government, and Daoudiyeh was virtually silent throughout the meeting.

15. (C) Embassy sources indicate that Fayeze's meetings with other parliamentary blocs proceeded along similar lines. During a November 3 discussion with the "National Action Front" bloc, for example, Fayeze listened carefully to the deputies and spoke of the need for a modern and democratic electoral law, but did not suggest how the government might revise the law. Likewise, while meeting members of the "National Parliamentary" bloc November 12, Fayeze said that the government was committed to transparency in performance and the guarantee of equal opportunities for all Jordanians, but did not indicate how the government would work towards accomplishing these goals.

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AN OLIVE BRANCH FOR THE ISLAMISTS  
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16. (C) Another of Fayeze's first moves as Prime Minister was to visit the "Controller General" of the Muslim Brotherhood, Abul Majed Dhneibat, said to be the first courtesy call of its kind for a prime minister to a senior Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leader. Reportedly instructed by King Abdullah to engage Islamists, Fayeze described the MB in an interview

November 15 as "an important party that we respect and will work with to enhance the process of political development."

17. (C) Fayez met November 5 with the 17-member Islamic Action Front (IAF) parliamentary bloc, the political wing of the MB. According to press reports, Fayez spoke with his audience in mind, emphasizing the need for a democratic electoral law stemming from Islamic principles and pledging strong support for a Palestinian state. At the same time, however, he said the government had to respect its treaties with other countries and its obligations towards the international community. IAF deputy Dr. Tayseer al-Fetiani (West Banker, Amman - 2nd District) told PolCouns and PolOff November 16 that the meeting had gone well and that the IAF hoped for "good" relations with the government, stating that it was only "natural" for there to be an opposition party in Parliament. But while Fetiani reported that Fayez seemed to genuinely listen to their views, he expressed doubt whether the new government would translate its positive rhetoric toward the IAF into concrete policies that allowed Islamists a greater voice or impact on policy.

18. (U) Another IAF deputy, Ali Abul Sukkar (Zarqa - 2nd District) told the press that the meeting with Fayez "definitely signals a new era of ties between the government and the Islamic movement." He cautioned, however, that "one cannot really comment on anything now until after the new cabinet starts its mission and tangible results can be felt."

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ENGAGING CIVIL SOCIETY  
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19. (U) Fayez has additionally reached out to civil society organizations ranging from the Jordan Federation for Labor Unions to the Jordan Artists Association. He has moreover made a point to meet with women's groups including the Jordanian National Commission for Women and the General Federation for Jordanian Women.

110. (C) In a more controversial move, Fayez met November 10 with members and the presidents of Jordan's 14 professional associations. These associations had previously formed a centralized Professional Associations Council (PAC) that was declared illegal by a court of cassation in November 2002 for its political activities dominated by an anti-normalization agenda. According to media reports, Fayez stated that he had no preconceived notions about the 14 associations and recognized that they were important national institutions that play a major role in the country's political development process.

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LET'S NOT FORGET THE PRESS  
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111. (U) Fayez's expansive outreach program also included the press. On November 4, Fayez visited with members of the Higher Media Council (HMC) and officials of the Jordan Press Association (JPA). In a public statement, JPA President Tareq Momani described the meeting as "frank, positive and constructive." Momani said that Fayez promised "tangible changes" to current legislation so as to provide greater press freedom. Although noting that such promises had been made by previous governments, Momani said "this time it could be different, because this prime minister is in tune with King Abdullah's determination to move things forward."

112. (U) Fayez continued his dialogue with the press November 15 by calling on the country's four major daily newspapers, meeting editors, reporters and columnists. During his visits, Fayez said that improving the performance of local media was a government priority and that political development required "a free and constructive media capable of carrying citizens' concerns." Fayez also stated that "the media has the right to criticize the government, but such criticism should be directed towards government programs and performance and not personally against government officials."

113. (U) Similarly, in a November 16 meeting with the chief editors of 17 weekly newspapers, Fayez stated that the government would not interfere in the work of the press and media, but warned that any misuse of authority to criticize or harm individuals, rather than discuss policies, would be handled by the judiciary. Fayez also called on the press to exercise objectivity and accuracy in their reporting, urging the editors to verify information before going to print. Following the meeting, Jihad Momani, chief editor of the Shihaan weekly (and newly appointed senator, septel), said that Fayez promised amendments to the current Press and Publications Law to ensure greater press freedoms and prevent the detention of journalists over press violations.

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COMMENT

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14. (C) Fayez's outreach has touched groups -- like the IAF and the professional associations -- that have received little positive attention from recent prime ministers. Embassy interlocutors appear genuinely pleased with Fayez's outreach campaign and his willingness to listen to their concerns. But at the same time, many remain skeptical whether the government will actually incorporate their ideas and suggestions into its still-unpublished plan of action. Fayez could find further "dialogue" much more difficult when he has to debate the merits of proposed legislation or specific programs, rather than discuss general goals and lend a sympathetic ear.

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